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Groups say Harvey shows urgency of waste pits removal

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San Jacinto Waste Pits Superfund Site

Posted: Tuesday, September 5, 2017 12:00 am | Updated: 5:58 am, Tue Sep 5, 2017.

By Christopher James

In the aftermath of Harvey, environmental advocates are calling on the U.S. EPA to inspect the cap at the San Jacinto River Waste Pits Superfund site, make any temporary repairs, and then permanently remove waste as soon as possible.

To discuss the call for the San Jacinto River Waste Pits' immediate inspection and removal, the Galveston Bay Foundation, Texas Health and Environment Alliance and Coastal Conservation Association will hold a joint press conference today at 11 a.m. at the waste pits sites, 18001 East Freeway.

"The waste pits present an unacceptable health risk to our first responders and our entire region," said

Jacquelyn Young, executive director of the Texas Health and Environment Alliance. "At this point, we have no way of knowing what toxic chemicals are lurking in the floodwaters. For years our communities and local government have told the EPA it is not a matter of if, but when, a storm devastates the pits. We all need to work together to see this unacceptable risk removed from our waterways."

Filled to capacity with paper mill sludge, which contains mercury, PCBs, furans and cancer-causing dioxins, the waste pits were abandoned and have remained in the San Jacinto River since the mid-1960s.

Champion Paper used the site as a dumpsite and since abandoning them, the pits subsided and the dioxin-laden waste was exposed to the waters and sediments of the San Jacinto River.

The pits are now partially submerged in the river with temporary armored cap, made of a liner and rocks, to protect any contamination. But since the cap was installed in 2011, it has required many repairs and extensive maintenance without a 500-year flood event like Harvey hitting the area.

"This latest flood event reiterates our position that the dioxin wastes at the site, much of it located literally in the San Jacinto River in times of normal flows, should be fully removed as quickly as possible," said Scott Jones, director of advocacy for Galveston Bay Foundation. "A tidal river in a region known for hurricane strikes and prone to floods is not the location to attempt to contain toxic waste."

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At this point, the condition of the cap and waste pits is unknown since Harvey hit.

"The dioxin in the pits has the potential to devastate the Galveston Bay recreational and commercial fishing industries, and the businesses that depend upon them," said Shane Bonnot, advocacy director for CCA-Texas. "That is a risk we can no longer take."

The EPA said it would have a dive team out as early as Monday to survey the cap underwater if conditions allow.

EPA and TCEQ technical experts took news crews to three Superfund sites Monday, one being the waste pits. Boats were on the water determining impacts at the temporary armored cap in the San Jacinto River.

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner and city leaders were then briefed by EPA and TCEQ senior leadership on multiple issues, including the status of the Superfund sites in and around the Houston area.

The two agencies are also monitoring air and water quality data that will be analyzed by experts and released to the public as soon as possible.

To ensure the safety of residents and Galveston Bay, they will call for the EPA to make a final decision right now to ensure the waste is full removed before the next storm hits.



For more information about the site, visit <https://www.epa.gov/tx/sjrwsp>.



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